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Regional Land Partnerships Evaluation Plan

Final Report

Department of the Environment and Energy

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# Introduction

This report presents an evaluation plan for the six outcomes of the Regional Land Partnerships (RLP) component of the National Landcare Program. The plan aims to create an approach that will drive clear and effective reporting on the achievements across RLP. It is also intended to provide advice for the Australian Government and RLP Service Providers on how to prepare for both medium-term and end of program evaluations.

As part of the foundation work for the RLP program, an RLP Monitoring Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) framework was developed. This framework is based on the Australian Government’s Natural Resource Management Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Framework (2009). Another part of this foundation work was the set of high level program logics prepared for each of the six RLP outcomes.

This project has taken the existing MERI frameworks and high level RLP logics, and prepared detailed evaluation plans for each outcome. The aim of these plans is to:

* Clearly identify the short-, medium- and long-term goals of each outcome
* Identify the indicators and measures that will be used to assess progress towards those outcomes
* Define the type of data that Service Providers will be expected to collect in order to report on that progress.

## This document

This report includes an evaluation plan for each of the 5-year RLP program outcomes, namely:

* 1. By 2023, there is restoration of, and reduction in threats to, the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through the implementation of priority actions.
  2. By 2023, the trajectory of species targeted under the Threatened Species Strategy, and other EPBC Act priority species, is stabilised or improved.
  3. By 2023, invasive species management has reduced threats to the natural heritage Outstanding Universal Values of World Heritage properties through the implementation of priority actions.
  4. By 2023, the implementation of priority actions is leading to an improvement in the condition of EPBC Act listed Threatened Ecological Communities.
  5. By 2023, there is an increase in the awareness and adoption of land management practices that improve and protect the condition of soil, biodiversity and vegetation.
  6. By 2023, there is an increase in the capacity of agriculture systems to adapt to significant changes in climate, markets and extreme weather.

These individual plans are presented in Appendices 1 to 6.

The report also includes an explanation of some of the key elements of the evaluation plans including targets, assumptions, and the role of indicators. Section 2 includes discussions of how target-setting, setting baselines, dealing with assumptions and the role that indicators play in measuring progress have been considered in these plans.

## Intended audience

The evaluation plans presented here are intended to be used by the Australian Government (the Department of the Environment and Energy, and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources), and by RLP Service Providers responsible for project delivery in their Management Units across Australia.

Australian Government

The logics and key evaluation questions (KEQs) are intended to provide the Australian Government with a clear guide on how best to evaluate and report on project investment contributions to:

* Project-specific outcomes
* 5-year program outcomes, and
* Long-term program outcomes.

This evaluation and reporting depends heavily on the data collection and reporting by Service Providers.

Service providers

The logic and the monitoring plan for each outcome provides Service Providers with guidance on:

* How project activities are expected to lead to short and medium-term results, and how those results link to the relevant 5-year RLP outcome. This information should help to shape project delivery.
* The measurements and data that needs to be collected over the course of delivering project(s) in order to report on the contribution to the RLP program outcome(s).

# Evaluation plans

The evaluation plan for each outcome consists of:

* A **program logic**
* **Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and sub-questions**, and
* A **monitoring plan** which outlines what data will be collected, by whom and how often.

In the following sections the key elements of these components are described.

## Program Logics

The program logics have been developed to ensure consistency with the RLP tender process and with the Department’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool (MERIT) as the key reporting tool.

The program logics document the ‘Core Services’ (to be delivered by Service Providers for each Management Unit) and the ‘Project Services’ as specified for each outcome in the RLP Request for Tender. These activities form the content of the service delivery contracts with each provider, and annual monitoring and reporting (via MERIT) will be based on these services.

The next levels of the program logics identify short- and medium and long-term project outcomes:

**Short-term outcomes** – outcomes achieved over 1 to 3 years. All projects will have short-term outcomes. Even though they are focused on a relatively short period of time, they are still expected to contribute to the 5-year Outcome. This contribution should be described via the program logic, with particular reference to the relevant indicators and assumptions.

**Medium-term outcomes** – outcomes delivered over 3 to 5 years. For 5 year projects, these will also be the end of program outcomes. All 3 to 5 year projects will have medium term outcomes, and these are to be reported on by the end date of the project. Medium-term project outcomes will contribute to the 5-year outcome. The indicators identified at the medium-term level of the logic should be used to describe progress towards these outcomes.

**Long term outcomes** – these are the outcomes that are expected 10-20 to emerge well after the end of the current project. In most cases, they will not be able to be directly measured within the life of the program, so indicators will be used to assess progress.

Assumptions

Assumptions are a critical element in all program logics. Assumptions help to explain how one level of the logic links to the next. There are generally two types of assumptions:

1. Knowledge-based assumptions that draw on research, literature or previous experience to describe expected changes, and
2. Assumptions that relate to conditions or circumstances that are beyond the control or influence of the project or program.

Best practice in evaluation includes identifying any critical assumptions that can or need to be tested during the course of a multi-year project. For example, a technical expert might be engaged to test the assumption that there is natural regeneration of a particular vegetation community following weed control efforts.

The evaluation plans presented here do not identify any specific assumption testing because this generally requires detailed knowledge of the particular project. **The question of whether any assumption testing is warranted for a given project should be considered as part of project MERI planning.**

Target setting

The program logic and monitoring plan provide a useful framework to develop targets for a project. The process of identifying the project services (activities) and the short- and medium-term outcomes expected to be achieved during a project presents an opportunity to also identify the amounts of each project service and outcome(s) that are anticipated. The project budget is a key factor in setting targets, since this will determine the amount of project services, and therefore outcomes, a project can deliver.

This target-setting process can only be done meaningfully at the individual project level. As part of the MERI planning process for each RLP project, Service Providers will identify targets for the project services and outline the short- and medium-term outcomes they plan to deliver.

## Key evaluation questions

The second key element of the evaluation plans is the set of KEQs created for each outcome. In preparing these evaluation plans, we have drawn on the general KEQs defined for the five evaluation categories or themes set out on the Australian Government’s Natural Resource Management Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Framework (2009) (Table 2‑1).

For each outcome, a set of specific evaluation questions have been determined, and the link to the relevant parts of the program logic. For example, the KEQs for effectiveness include specific questions on the delivery of project services and short- and medium-Term Outcomes.

Table 2‑1: RLP program evaluation themes (adapted from the Australian Government Natural Resource Management Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Framework, 2009)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evaluation themes | Definition |
| Effectiveness | A measure of the extent to which a program, project or initiative has attained, or is expected to attain, its relevant objectives efficiently and in a sustainable way. |
| Appropriateness | A determination made through comparing the program with the needs of the intended beneficiaries using any of the techniques of needs analysis. Alternatively, the program could be evaluated in terms of its compliance with process. |
| Impact | A change in the condition of biophysical, social, economic and/or institutional assets. An impact may be positive or negative, primary or secondary, short-term or long-term, direct or indirect, and/or intended or unintended. Impacts are sometimes realised after the formal project is completed. |
| Efficiency | The notion of getting the highest value out of program or project resources. |
| Legacy | The enduring consequences of past investments, policies or actions that can be captured and/or bequeathed. |

## Monitoring plans

The third key element of the evaluation plans is the monitoring plan prepared for each outcome. The monitoring plan defines the specific data that needs to be collected at all levels of the program logic. That is, it identifies the data required to show that the project has delivered the project services as planned, which is relatively simple given that these services are generally well-defined activities. More importantly, the plan also identifies how the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes should be measured for each RLP outcome.

There are two key concepts that have informed these monitoring plans: baseline measures and indicators as tools to measure progress. The next sections describe how these two concepts have been treated in the RLP outcome evaluation plans.

Baseline measures

The RLP outcomes all focus on some form of change. Outcomes 1 to 4 specify changes in environmental conditions, such as vegetation condition, or the trajectory of a threatened species. Outcomes 5 and 6 are seeking changes in land management and agricultural systems, for both production and environmental benefits.

In order to measure these changes, it is critical to have a starting point or baseline(s) against which a change can be measured. This has been addressed in the evaluation plans by specifying the monitoring data that must be collected at all levels of the logic (identified in the monitoring plan). The most important measures of change are the measures of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. With this focus in mind, the monitoring plans identify the measures (either direct measures or indicators) and timeframes over which they should be measured. For example, the monitoring plans for most outcomes suggest that the short- and medium-term outcomes should be measured at two- to three-year intervals, meaning that a baseline measure is made at the project commencement, and is remeasured after two or three years to detect changes.

measuring progress via INDICATORS

The monitoring plan created for each RLP outcome defines the data that can be used to assess progress at all levels of the program logic. Project services can be directly measured, and this is a well-established practice among Service Providers.

Measuring short-, medium- and long-term outcomes can be more challenging. In determining what data should be collected to assess progress in delivering these outcomes, a decision hierarchy has been applied:

* If there is a practical and cost-effective way to directly measure the outcome, then this should be employed
* If there is no direct measure, then a direct indicator of that outcome should be used
* If the indicators are difficult or too costly to measure (relative to the project size and duration) then it may be necessary to use measures of activities to assess progress. This is the least preferred option.

This hierarchy has informed the process of selecting the indicators listed in the monitoring plans for each outcome. Indicators have been identified that are practical, meaningful and can be collected cost effectively. The techniques to collect indicator data are not specified because each project needs to define the appropriate indicators for a particular project, and match data collection to the project’s goals, size and duration. For example, a small budget, one-year project would approach collection of vegetation quality data differently to a large budget, five-year project. Both projects collect and report vegetation quality data, however, the specific data would vary between the projects.

# Reporting

The RLP reporting obligations of Service Providers and the Australian Government are outlined below.

## Service Provider Reporting

All Service Provider reports are submitted in MERIT.

Outputs report

This type of report will outline the services delivered for the projects, and includes spatial reporting and photographs of a sample of intervention locations for each project. Outputs reporting occurs a quarterly or six‑ monthly, depending on the Services Agreement between the Departments and the Service Providers.

Annual report

Service Providers will submit an annual report for each project, confirming that the project is being delivered in line with the MERI Plan. Annual reports will also highlight key project achievements and/or issues, and propose any adaptive management actions for each project.

Outcomes report 1

This type of report includes, for each short-term outcome set out in the MERI plan, a summary of the state of change detected between the baseline established by the Service Provider as at the beginning of the project and subsequent follow up monitoring undertaken by the Service Provider. For projects three years or less in duration, this report is to be submitted by the project end date. For longer projects, this report is to be submitted by the three year anniversary of the project.

Outcomes report 2

This report addresses, for each medium-term outcome set out in the MERI plan, a summary of the state of change detected between the baselines established by the Service Provider at the beginning of the project, and subsequent follow up monitoring undertaken by the Service Provider. This type of report is only for those projects greater than three years duration, and is to be submitted by the project end date.

Core Services Reporting

Service Providers are required to submit a Core Services report each time an invoice is submitted, indicating whether Core Services have been met or not. A more detailed Annual Core Services is also required to be submitted by each Service Provider.

## Australian Government Reporting

Annual progress report

Information for the annual progress reports will be collated from Service Provider reports in MERIT. Departmental annual progress reports will focus on project services, and over time, they will also be able to report on key performance indicators to measure and report on progress towards the six program level outcomes.

Mid-term and end of program evaluations

**Mid-term performance evaluations:** A comprehensive program evaluation will take place in 2021. For this evaluation, the Departments will use Regional Land Partnerships Service Providers’ information to report on overall program progress which will be used to implement program improvements and inform future program design. The evaluation will include evaluation of processes and progress towards outcomes, so would draw on the indicators identified for the medium- and long-term outcomes.

**End-of-program performance evaluation:** The Departments will conduct an end-of-program evaluation in 2023. This evaluation will revisit the mid-program performance evaluations and incorporate new information to provide a closing evaluation of overall program performance of processes, achievement of outcomes and economics. The findings will be used to inform future program delivery and will be informed by service provider reporting, targeted and long-term monitoring.

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